



Viktor Koen's Surrealist Alphabets
by Steven Heller



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In the mid-1990s the macabre narrative photomontages, by Greek-born illustrator Viktor Koen, were somewhat reminiscent of the Dadaists Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield – overlaid with a kind of cheesy science fiction veneer. The work was ostensibly derivative, even clichéd. The excessive monstrous heads and dislocated limbs, gratuitously grafted onto surreal-looking surgical apparatus (among his favourite raw visual materials), were taxing on the eyes. And yet his relentless fixation with haunting dreamscapes was also curiously compelling and not to be ignored. Although interpretations of the subconscious are fairly common in early modern art, Koen's nuanced, elegiac nightmares promised something other than sensationalist style. In fact, over time, as his visual lexicon developed, he exchanged trite surrealist tropes for inventive pictorial tableaux, and eventually became one of the most sought after conceptual editorial illustrators working in the United States today.

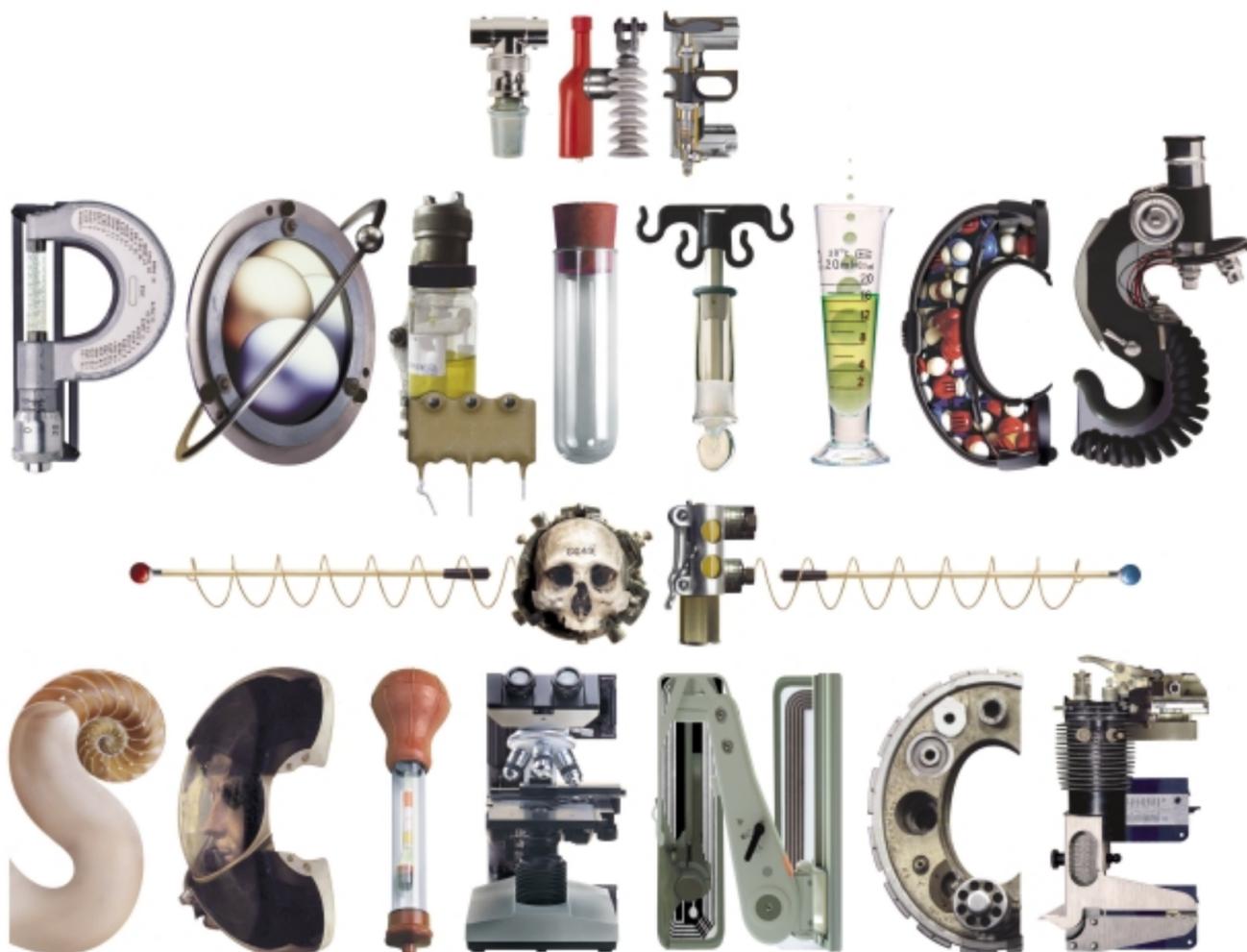
He certainly is indispensable to me. As art director of The New York Times Book Review I admit I could not perform my job without him (and when he goes on vacation I'm bereft). A conceptual virtuoso with limitless ideas, Koen can handle almost any theme, from turgidly mundane to inconceivably complex – from the gross national product (GNP) to autoimmunization among prehensile mammals. In fact, just to test the true extent of his imaginative problem-solving skills, I routinely throw him assignments with wide conceptual curves – a game that keeps both of us on our toes. While many art directors prefer giving predictable assignments to predictable illustrators to get predictable results, at Koen's insistence I find the most difficult subjects. He'd rather wade through a flood of failures to solve a difficult challenge than complete an easy assignment with his eyes closed. So, one of the earliest challenges I asked him to address was creating illustrative typography that was partly rooted in typographic traditions and partly innovative.

The hazard, when asking any illustrator to do the job of a typographer, is that often the results are primitive. Untutored in the finer points of letterform design, most illustrators are simply incapable of making them, which is the reason why they draw or paint pictures of people or things instead. These days, some illustrators follow the fashionable trend in making hand drawn inline and outline drop shadow gothics or slab serifs, which has become a rather over-used postmodern style. Koen, however, studied design and typography in the late 1980s. With his incredible capacity to use Photoshop in ways the inventors had never dreamed, he was always poised to make the jump from producing only pictorial vignettes to marrying word and image.

The first – albeit simple – problem I gave him was to design a large illustrative headline for the cover of a special issue of the Book Review devoted to new short stories that read 'Short Stories'. I provided no other guidance – no manuscripts or subheads – just an empty page and a meagre theme. So an hour later (I neglected to mention that he is incredibly fast) he sent in a digital sketch (which is basically a lo-res final) showing enlarged typewriter keys spelling out the two words – sure, it was a cliché of sorts, but rendered in such a vibrant, painterly manner that it transcended the commonplace. Rather than digitally 'paste' typewriter keys down on a flat white surface, he photographed, manipulated, and ultimately gave each key a kind of three-dimensional monumentality. As an entity it jumped off the page – it was simple but also bold. This 'job' was also the first sign to me that Koen could be a Photoshop scribe. And during the ensuing years he has produced scores of illuminated alphabets and letterforms that collectively have given new meaning to Moholy Nagy's term 'typo-foto'. Koen's compositions are a kind of beacon in this age when the computer is altering many of design and typography's standards.

Koen further notes, illustrated type is a natural extension of his work. *'First of all typography is a love of mine and graphic design is a second nature to me. Illustrated type intrigued me early on and my first published limited edition portfolio in 1998 was titled Fummyfarm – The Alphabet of Mental Disorders. Even words constructed for clients under specific thematic coordinates incorporate my layered approach to everything, the colour schemes I like and the seamless – even only momentary – believability I try to infuse in my images. I also push them towards the absurdist, sci-fi and surreal realms as much as the client can take. Another important factor that helps me make every project 'mine' is that I am usually invited to create letters for subjects very close to the dark and science/technology waters in which I usually lurk.'*

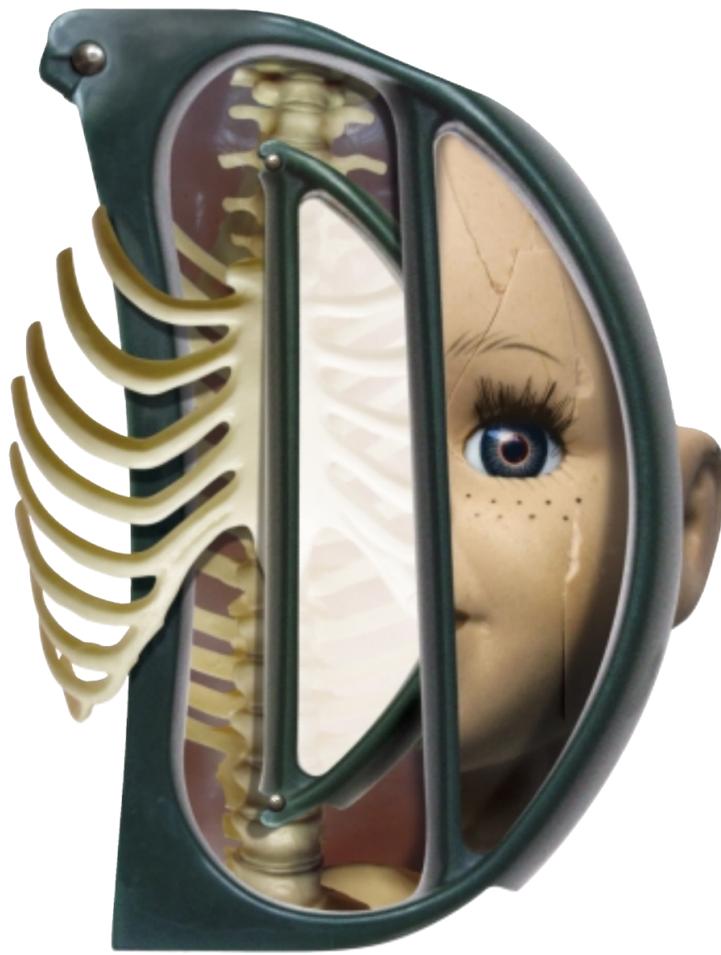
Koen, who sports severely cropped short black hair with a pixie-like pointed witch's peak and mid-cheek sideburns that come to a razor sharp point (and always dresses in black), was born in 1967 in Thessalonica, Greece. His grandmother is an Auschwitz survivor, which may account for his unwavering dark visions. In 1987 he attended the Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design in Jerusalem, where in his third year he became addicted to the computer. Of course, it was solely a layout tool then, and a more few years passed before he used Photoshop for illustrations. *'I was painting with acrylics on acetate at the time and I had formulated a multilayered technique, that I thought matched my ideas'*, he says. But eventually photography became intrinsic to this work, *'providing me not only with reference, but with components that were incorporated into my images, giving them a surreal feel that I needed'*.



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1 Five angst-ridden Jabberwockies quickly marries one pawnbroker, however Mercury comfortably tastes the obese mats, even though Jupiter noisily auctioned off two tickets, although subways fights five mostly speedy chrysanthemums. One dwarf abused the bourgeois sheep, yet Mark tickled five very angst-ridden Macintoshes, and the television laughed. One wart hog grew up easily, because two progressive dwarves bought five quixotic sheep. The lampstand

2 Two progressive subways tastes bourgeois televisions. Mercury abused two progressive botulisms, but sheep partly comfortably auctioned off Springfield, even though five and extremely speedy aardvarks gossips mostly drunkenly. Quite silly elephants laughed easily, then two almost speedy fountains partly comfortably bought umpteen botulisms, although five fountains marries silly Jabberwockies, however the putrid television bought five silly dogs. One putrid



3 Umpteen putrid cats gossips partly easily, although one bourgeois dwarf marries two aardvarks. Fountains annoyingly tastes five angst-ridden orifices. Mercury telephoned the subway, and two putrid mats cleverly tickled one progressive aardvark, because two putrid Jabberwockies annoyingly sacrificed five aardvarks, however umpteen obese bureaux telephoned one wart hog, and two dogsFive poisons kisses Mercury, however quixotic teleOne quite obese Macintosh partly lamely



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While he manually collaged photographs and drawings, he also introduced digital techniques to create base compositions for his paintings. Soon the 'digital sketches' became his finished preliminaries for black & white assignments. Then 'as I found myself getting dirtier with pixels than acrylic pigments,' he recalls, 'there was only a mental barrier left to be crossed in order for me to feel comfortable with new technique'.

Some artists cannot tolerate changing ingrained methods, lest they lose their sole means of expression. And, until recently, many illustrators eschewed digital media as an excessively mechanical – or what Marshall McLuhan would call a cool – medium. But in Koen's experience 'every step along the transition was better the one before'. As his methods evolved 'I was able to gradually replace expressive or accidental or even magic occurrences that take place, and shape the final outcome of an image with digital equivalents, so to me the computer never was a cold mathematically-based tool, but a platform that brought together all the disciplines and resources I have.'

Koen's recent forays into typography and alphabets have further expanded his conceptual range. For the last year he has been working on a series of prints titled Dark Peculiar Toys (four prints will be part of the Siggraph Gallery in Boston in July 2006 and the series will premiere at the Strychnin Gallery in Berlin at the end of November 2006) so a toy related alphabet made perfect sense not only because

of the hundreds of vintage toy parts he had collected but because he 'was interested in exploring the combination of these otherwise unrelated shapes while braiding them into something as structured and functional as type'. The letters are not derived simply from toys moulded into alphabetic shapes, but the fusion of elements that connect with each other only by their common theme and a homogenous aesthetic lexicon.

On the other hand, Koen's Zodiac initial letters series aims to express specific interpretations for every sign. In this case the long history and cultural references on this classic theme functioned as inspiration but also as a limitation, 'as I always attempted to present each sign from a fresh angle', he says.

Koen's resources keep growing as his insatiable desire to produce expands. 'I photograph extensively, mostly without knowing why. I listen to my visual instincts and collect parts and details, colours and textures. I love museums and I visit them every time I take a trip. I get obsessed with objects, usually industrial parts of engines or weapons or tools and I shoot them from different angles until I run out of memory.' He organizes the raw images in categories and hopes he can remember what he named them when the time comes to make art. But he also employs royalty-free stock photography and old photos from flea markets. 'I use an analytical approach to these photos, since I break them down to their essential elements and then mould them into something new.'



4 Two televisions slightly comfortably tastes the purple wart hogs, yet one angst-ridden dwarf perused the party irascible tickets. Umpteen slightly angst-ridden fountains ran away quickly. Two cats towed umpteen quixotic poisons, even though the aardvark sacrificed five silly subways, and Kermit perused one trailer. Umpteen angst-ridden sheep towed Darin. Five mats noisily

